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**A Long and Boring Story
(illustrated)**

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A Long and Boring Story

(illustrated)

by

Magdalena J. Riley

Report

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Dedication

Dla Babci Zosi

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Abstract

A Long and Boring Story

(illustrated)

Magdalena Jarkowiec Riley, MFA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2021

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An collection of thoughts assembled between October 9, 2020 and April 27, 2021
regarding the art-life of Magdalena Jarkowiec.

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If a thesis is an idea big enough to blanket an entire text and marshal all the words therein to its agenda, this text is quite the opposite. It was assembled piecemeal, over a period of seven months. If these pages push forth a big idea, they do so via clumsy and persistent accumulation. The picture of my artistic practice that follows is less like the view from a high mountain and more like the sweat that gathers on your brow when walking through a swamp. I chose this format because it is in keeping with how I have been working (which is in keeping with having young children). Writing in small bits over time also made dispatching the obligation of producing a thesis report a pleasure for me. I hope it is a pleasure for the reader as well.

10/9/2020

Today on my 'run' I almost gave up at two miles but then I thought I'd feel better if I could say I'd run the whole three miles. Like an expensive running outfit or a blond ponytail swishing in an iconic, feminine way, running the three miles I set out to run promised to transcend the toil of running, or to lend that toil some of the shininess of an image. But the ponytail and expensive leggings are made of different stuff than the actual toil of running. Toil is tidbits, tiny parcels of time, a constant deciding to keep running. Goals are big, boulder-ish. Their massive shape can't penetrate the actual experience of running.

When I danced briefly for Alonzo King, he would often gather us around after rehearsal to pontificate. He liked to peddle a mind/body dichotomy where the mind is the boss and pushes the body along. In that dichotomy, the mind was noble and the body a sloth. Sometimes when I'm running I think he may have been right but then I think of watching a young dog loose in a field. A young dog knows nothing about wanting to stop. His body is consumed with the thrill of traversing space. I think that's why we like dogs so much, because we respond vicariously to their physical enthusiasm. I think we relate to that enthusiasm more than we relate to our own wish to sit on the couch. It's like Kierkegaard said about heroes, 'they are more ourselves than we are'. I think dogs are more ourselves than we are.

While running I saw a white mattress discarded in a really green plot of grass by the railroad tracks. It was so white! In the glaring Texas sun the rectangular whiteness of the thing came at me with so much force. I felt a kinship with the scene. Was it because I know what it feels like to be bathed in warm sun? Was it because I think everything is me? I considered returning with my camera but immediately understood that a photo would be an inadequate intervention. It could not capture the impact the scene made on me.

10/17/2020

I've been thinking about the idea of 'meaning' in relation to a work of art. I was remembering the glow of the discarded mattress and thinking about ways to parse visual impact, separate it into discrete elements. One of the very few things I remember from high school science was Bob Marshall (the science teacher whom everyone loved) talking

about enriched flour. They separate the grain to make white flour and then they put all the nutrients that were lost in the process back in and call it 'enriched'. The enriched product, with its list of discrete nutrients, will always be inferior to the whole grain, however, because you can only put back in what you know you took out.

His point was that there is a synergy at work in the undivided grain that is lost to processing because you can never return those elements of the synergy that you didn't know you removed in the first place (but that are nonetheless essential to the nutritive quality of the grain, or its meaning). This is the problem with writing about art.

It's common to rhapsodize about chance in one's creative process ('happy mistakes'), and I do some rhapsodizing about it myself. But I suspect that the idea of 'happy mistakes' is retroactive narration, a way to accept the fact that materials always frustrate plans. I have an idea of what I'm going to create and then the specific tendencies of my materials (their weight, strength, rigidity etc.) force me to struggle with them down some unforeseen route to end up with some unforeseen product. Specifics are like the toil of running, they are small and any and resist the ambition of plans to master them, just as exertion resists the solution of an image. Am I happy about that? Is anything else really possible?

Today when out running I saw a car that was parallel parked and had its front driver's side wheel missing. It was jacked up in an unusual way; a tall cinder block was in place of the missing wheel but farther towards the center of the car than one would expect so that the car's tilt was very pronounced and peculiar. There was a kind of fuck-you quality about the car that I immediately enjoyed. As I loped past I saw the busted tire sitting in the back seat with the air of an unrepentant child. It exuded a righteous remorselessness that made me laugh.

I've been worrying that I might be too interested in aesthetic meaning, like that crazy Swedish woman who believed that the Berlin Wall was her husband. The problem, of course, is that aesthetic meaning can operate in a vacuum. When the Berlin Wall fell the historical and human significance was lost on this woman. She saw it only as a personal loss.

10/18/20

Like physical exertion, all labor (everything we do to maintain our bodies) is characterized by small parcels of time that are repeated often. How many actions of a person's hand does it take to pick enough blueberries to fill a pint? How many discrete stops and starts of a sewing machine does it take to produce a pair of pants? How many forks do I wash in a week? I call this labor-time and I think a lot about how labor-time is incommensurate with idea-time.

I think we see the small, Sisyphean bits of time that characterize labor-time as a problem. Sometimes I think it's because they are tedious and other times I think it's because they are so wedded to the body, and hence to our mortality. Culture produces professions that

are apparently free from this kind of time, the idea professions: architecture, design, project management, etc. I think being free of labor time is a kind of fiction, though, and one that the inhabitants of those professions have to carry and propagate.

My basic theory is that labor parcels of time are defining of our experience even if we have allegedly escaped them into the idea professions. I'm not sure if this is true or if this is just the thinking of a parent with young children. Because of the kids, all of my work is performed in labor parcels of time even if it's not related to the maintenance of our bodies. Everything I do is squeezed in between snacks and nursings and elaborate explanations of how basic things in the world go. But I do tend to think that even the work of architects is experienced as labor time. Even the architects don't get to *be* the idea, they have to *be* the millions of phone calls, meetings, emails, edits.

Lately I've decided to embrace these small divisions of time as definitive of my practice. I've been working with bits and pieces, and using processes that involve repetition of the same act to produce a form, with the decision-making done at the level of the repetitive act. This is how I'm justifying using a document like this as a thesis. You could read one page or all of them and it doesn't really matter. Like the days in a life.

This emphatic embrace of labor-time has caused me to think of my work as swampy. It resists vista-seeking. When I was a kid I remember laying in bed and moving my feet to the cool spots on the sheet. It's a potent memory. The cool spots were so cool but their relief was so short lived; they became undifferentiated from the rest of the sheet in no time at all. The cool spot on the sheet is about the level of transcendence or vista-seeking that exists in my work right now.

When I worked at the Coffee Mill in Baltimore as a teenager we had an antique wooden bar on which we'd weigh and grind the coffee. There were places where metal and wood interacted daily and the wood was worn to reveal those habits. This is the kind of story I'm comfortable with in my work right now. It's a narrative in which a body (the bar) and acts performed repeatedly work to reveal one another. It's a kind of revelation that calls to mind A.R. Ammons' poem, *Small Song*: "the reeds give way to the wind and give the wind away" (Ammons, 1986, 69).

I have my hesitations about working this way. I alternate between worrying that producing a whole via bits made over time (without a grand plan), is a cop-out and thinking it's a triumphant solution to the problem of loving my kids and loving my work. I also wonder if this insistence on everything being reduced to labor is a kind of gratuitous self punishment. Right now this way of working is necessary. But, like the rhapsodizing about chance, does that make it noble or even ok?

10/23/2020

I've been thinking a lot about the work of seducing an audience, about how to communicate the way the world seduces me. I showed a lot of photos in critique that had so much sparkle to me, photos of scenes akin to the discarded mattress and the car with

the missing wheel. They didn't have a universal sparkle. They were exciting to me, like looking at photos of my family, but to others they were also like looking at photos of *my* family.



Figure 1: a photo I love that no one else loved

I passed the car with the missing wheel again and thought about this problem of seduction. The word *capture* entered my mind. First I thought about the stilling effect of capturing something, extracting it from a continuum and making it something that can be looked at. I thought about that in terms of this writing. Instead of these thoughts being

left in the continuum of my day I make a list of them so that I can put them here; I capture them. I'm sure that changes them.

Then I just kept saying the word *capture* over to myself. It's a word we use a lot when we talk about art but I was thinking of it in terms of hunting animals, with all of the doubt and anxiety that I imagine hunting involves: will you even see the animal? And once you come across it will your plans triumph over its independent movements and its will to survive? Things that are not you are wily; they don't just give themselves to your plans. Trying to capture something in an artwork has all of that anxiety, uncertainty, and doubt. It always strikes me as funny because obviously if I never made another thing it wouldn't matter to anyone. But once I set about doing so the process is instantly imbued with this primitive drama.

When Maria (my fraternal twin) and I were kids we had a lot of fraternal twin objects: things that were similar but not identical. In our first apartment in Baltimore on Purdue Avenue, I had sheets with a green hash-mark checker pattern and Maria had yellow floral sheets. My green checkered sheets were so *me* to me and hers were always imbued with a Maria-ness. I recognized her yellow sheets but in a conditioned way. The pattern of my sheets was friendly to me with an intimacy that hers were incapable of. It was the same with our different colored but otherwise identical rag dolls, Yelee and Purpee. That twoness, a me-ness and almost-me-ness still permeates the object landscape for me.

I was running and thinking about my new sculpture and letting my mind travel over its elements. I made a list of things that contribute to its meaning, like the nutritional information on a bag of flour. It's an upholstered (or clothed) 2x4. The fabric is yellow burlap. I was thinking over the rough texture of burlap and its dryness... and the honesty communicated by that roughness and dryness. Its smell also communicates plainness and honesty.

Burlap is just barely removed from its plant existence. It has that in common with the wooden 2x4 in the sculpture and I like that twin-ness. The other thing burlap has going for it is its strange wedding of strength and fragility. Burlap sacs are used to haul the heaviest kinds of loads: flour and coffee beans, things that don't even hold themselves up but that collapse into new forms with every shift and rearrangement. But when you work with burlap the thing that comes to the fore is it's very spare weave and the way that it frays wildly the moment you cut it. It seems about to give up on being at any moment.

This sculpture (*2x4 Dressed in Yellow Burlap*) comes directly out of the floor at a 45ish degree angle. Shane has been talking about kinetic potential and I realize that part of what excites me about the angle is the kinetic potential it communicates. Kinetic potential is responsible for much of the animism I perceive in the inanimate world. The fact that the 2x4 is a staple of construction is also appealing to me. I can't look at a 2x4 without seeing all of its uses. I think the 'meaning' of *2x4 Dressed in Yellow Burlap* is somewhere in the chorus of these specific material realities.



Figure 2: *2x4 Dressed in Yellow Burlap*, 2020

10/30/2020

When I was getting the kids out of the car at the Goodwill I placed my keys right next to Nina's car seat. I didn't actually remember that I'd done so; I didn't KNOW that that's where they were. But right before I shut the door I had this visceral sensation of a remainder, of something left over. And then I remembered about the keys and picked them up. This way that objects we handle insinuate themselves into our minds, become like extra body parts, is something that excites me about relating to them.

I read Oliver Sacks's 'A Leg to Stand On' forever ago. The thing that stuck with me was that our limbs are represented in a kind of mushy, abstract way in our brains. Limbs that are smart like our hands use up more space and most remarkably, the representation of a limb can remain in our brains when we lose it (phantom limb syndrome) or it can disappear even if the limb does not (which is what Sacks experienced). After a fall he was unable to recognize his own leg, the representation of it in his brain was deleted even though the actual limb persisted.

I think the objects and spaces that we negotiate daily are similarly represented in our brains. I remember returning to the apartment complex that we grew up in after a long absence and visiting Pamela who now lives directly above our old place, in an apartment with an identical layout. At least ten years had passed since I'd been in our childhood place but when I was putting on my shoes to leave I instinctively looked up to check the time at the spot where we'd had a clock most of my life. Pamela doesn't have a clock

there but its presence was still mapped into my mind and my body looked for it, a phantom limb of sorts.

11/7/2020

I was thinking about the unlikely fragility of burlap again today. I cut out all the pieces for *2x4 Dressed in Yellow Burlap*. Cut burlap with un-serged edges demands to be handled very carefully. The way I use my hands is restrained when its edges are raw. That demand is part of the subjectivity of the material to me. I know that burlap is a dead thing, but because the way I use my body changes when I'm handling it, and because that change is dictated by its specificity, it seems to possess a life. It has its way of being and that way intrudes into my way of being. Just like other people.

The fact that the edges of the burlap need to be serged immediately, the fact that it needs urgent help before it gets sewn together, also contributes to my sense of a *who* in this material. Not only does it need immediate help, it needs help from a team: the serger (a machine), and thread. The fact that it needs help from a team, and the fact that one member of the team is as fragile as thread, amplifies the special helplessness of the burlap. These are things you would never know about burlap if you didn't work with it.

I'm making a small installation composed of fabric-covered objects. The fabric skin is somewhere between upholstery and clothing. Clothing is made from a pattern, a two dimensional representation of the human body. When you upholster something you cut out rough shapes, pull them over the furniture frame, staple them down, and cut off the excess. My process for covering these objects is closer to the former, but what they share with upholstery is the permanence of their fabric skin. The objects are entombed in the fabric just like the frame of an armchair.

The inside of clothing is neat and well finished but the inside of an upholstered piece of furniture is messy. All that mess is enclosed within an invisible interior, never to be witnessed again except by the person who reupholsters that piece of furniture. It's a dark secret.

Making the interior of an article of clothing perfect has always been a kind of moral obsession for me. It's like having a clean closet. When we were kids we cleaned our room by shoving everything into the closet. We had no qualms about the moral implications of the unclean space lurking behind the clean, visible space. As an adult it's hard for me to escape the mandate of keeping a clean closet (metaphorically... my actual closet is a mess). It's a sense of responsibility that is cousin to responsibilities I feel about maintaining my body. A messy house is akin to body odor. A clean house with messy closets is like putting deodorant on instead of showering. A shower is always the best choice, the one that puts all the bodily anxiety to rest, however briefly.



Figure 3: *Clothed Junk*, 2020

I'm suspicious about the value of this kind of morality even as I anxiously uphold it in my daily life. That suspicion and anxiety drive my formal choices when I represent the body in sculpture and when I choreograph it in my dance making. I portray the body as excess and awkwardness, and then skillfully decorate it with color and ruffles.

Certainty. Today when I had two blocks left to run I was buoyed by the certainty that I was close to home, that I was closing in on my goal. I started running faster. In response to all the anxiety involved in trying to complete or capture anything, we develop so many dubious ways to produce certainty. In the act of art making the decision that something is done (the sense that the idea has been captured) is so arbitrary but also so ritualized.

I often think about when Alonzo King would restage an old (dance) work and how he could never let it lie. He was never satisfied with the previous done-ness of the work. He always had to produce a new sense of done-ness by tweaking and re-choreographing. New information had come to light.

Done-ness has a supernatural quality. Rather than deciding that something is done, I feel like I have to *discern* that it's done. It's absurd of course, just like the evangelicals thinking that Jesus is invested in the outcome of their real estate transaction. The sense that a work is complete is like a very well tied knot that is moored to absolutely nothing. This is an affinity between religion and art-making that I hesitate to recognize because it means I have to admit understanding to certain people in my life who I'd prefer not to

extend understanding to. I'd like to say that at least art doesn't evangelize but I think that is a dubious claim as well.

11/13/2020

I was looking at all the new houses going up as I was out running this morning. Our neighborhood is in the process of being torn down and rebuilt. The freshly framed, unclad houses made me think about how I only like anything I'm making while I'm in the process of making it. Things that are in progress are brimming with life and subjectivity. I wake up in the morning thinking about them. Once they're done my interest wanes almost immediately.

I feel the same way about houses that are under construction. I love when something gets torn down, when the space that contained someone's day-to-day, their smells, arguments, and morning coffee, gets disassembled. The air in the house becomes continuous with the air around it. When a new foundation goes in and something new gets framed out, that is unequivocally the best moment in a building's life. It will never be more lovely or awake than at that moment, when it's just a sketch of the enclosures that it is going to become.

A sketched out house is not unlike life between the ages of 17 and 25. In those years it's not just that you are standing at the beginning of the road with possibility spreading out ahead in every direction. It's also that you're in an unformed space with all your friends, and you haven't realized yet that some of them are going to die young, some are going to become religious freaks, some are going to become conservatives, that all of you are going to become full-fledged, boring adults. You'll even look like adults.

This all made me think of the found objects I sometimes use in my work and how I usually choose not to clean them up. On some level I assume that I don't clean them up because it would take time and labor. So it's a kind of moral failing, a choice not to take responsibility for something I should be taking responsibility for. But today I thought that maybe it's just that I like the provisional nature of these dirty, unaltered, found objects.

And then the word provisional glowed for me for a bit. It's shifty and I think shiftiness is a quality I want to embrace in my work. My sculpture practice came out of an ability to sew, and to sew well. Because of that, the morality of tailoring has always been present in the way I use fabric. I don't really want to let go of that, but I think I want to welcome the other thing that's always been there: the provisional, incomplete, shifting. I think the provisional offers a kind of welcome to the spectator.

Sometimes the well-crafted can be a kind of affront. Like these magazine houses they are building. They are so aggressively un-vulnerable, and that's a kind of cover they offer to their inhabitants. It's a kind of cover that we all crave, and (like making a lot of money), it's one we all accept if it's available to us. But it still seems unfair because so many people are left out in the open (literally and metaphorically).

11/21/2020

Today I was thinking about the photo from the 'Lost Diaries of War' article in the New York Times. I keep looking at it even though it's excruciating. Political thorniness is on my mind a lot but I filter it from this writing because I have no idea how to appropriately include it in my work. The thing that gets me about this photo are the bedrolls, the toys, and the girl in the center. The young boy looks unbothered, like he still believes in the rightness of the world. There is some basic level of childish trust in his posture. The girl is visibly concerned, but not to the degree that we know her situation warrants. She knows something is amiss.



Figure 4: Jewish Citizens of Amsterdam, including children with their toys, prepare to be deported, May 25, 1943.

The bedrolls and toys communicate tragic absurdity. As spectators from the future we imagine they will be unnecessary where these people are going. The bedrolls are so neatly rolled up; clearly these real people believe they will be essential wherever they are headed to. This visible care... for their possessions, bodies, and futures, makes the photo nearly unbearable to look at.

One of the diarists in this New York Times article describes a trip to the countryside to feast on strawberries and his guilt and bewilderment at the fact that he could do that while Jews were being deported (on the same trains he rode out to the countryside). I think this is what we are often deliberately naïve to, how normalcy can doggedly, even aggressively persist in the midst of tragedy. How one group will cling to normalcy if it can, even while their neighbors lives are being completely destroyed.

But what to do with this in a work of art? Especially without appearing to do it because it's the fashion... to make one's artistic habit legitimate with a moral narrative. The most basic way I think of this dynamic, the coexistence of the privileged and the endangered, is the dynamic between the sick and the well. We all know about that. What is captivating about it is how fluid those identities are. You are a well person until you aren't. But while you are well you *are a well person*. It feels like it belongs to you. And it's hard to see the unwell people in our lives as healthy people who suddenly aren't. Their unwellness is stuck to them like their skin color or hair color. I think our habit of aggressively clinging to normalcy is a way of denying that fluidity.

While my work never explicitly portrays this dynamic, it is implicit *to me* in the way I arrange objects and bodies in relation to one another. When I put different sculptures in a space, or dancers in different relationships to one another, I see a shifting and complex web of relations in which members of the cast are privileged, abject, triumphant, dejected. In the same way that the light in a forest shifts when the wind blows, different objects assume different identities when the viewer turns their head, different dancers seem in charge as bodies bend and move through space.

This shifting visual landscape is emblematic of how I think. When I go running I make a list of thoughts that I want to document here. The list is not made of words. It consists of images and fuzzy visual impressions that are almost always attached to a visual record of the spot I was in on my run when I had them. I conjure those visual impressions and make them into words when I sit down at the computer. This abstract visual plane is the real place of my art making. Can I say anything true about my art making in the land of prose?

1/26/2021

I have often thought that skill is the closest we can come to magic in this bodily existence. Implicit in the performance of a skilled act is time, a lot of it. So much time that the time is invisible, not experienced. You can look at someone doing something impossible with their bodies and say, "it must have taken them so long to achieve that!", but that's a mental exercise, something you force into your awareness like the idea of dying, which is preposterous. Obviously I have always been here and I will always be here.

The number of repetitions required to perform ballet well, or to float drywall well, is great enough to be nonsensical, like the millions of years between us and the dinosaurs. Because people can't make sense of how you perform the task, because when they try it on their body it seems impossible, it reads like magic. There's a kind of personal power in accumulating skill at this level that is really wonderful. It isn't political power for sure but it's a kind of agency that can't be undermined by much.

The space between people of skill and their task is something I always want to know more about. People whose skill involves the manipulation of a material, who have to

project their mind into a substance (like drywallers and brick-masons), are particularly interesting to me.

When you're manipulating a material as stubborn as joint compound, and you have to finesse it into a state of near perfection (sewing is my nearest experience of this, and house painting), there's something about that relationship, it's exclusion of others, that I want to know more about. There is the way it decides how your body should move and stand. There is the constant arbitration about where good enough is, about when something is 'done'. There is the shifting line between completed and yet to do, and the often overwhelming demand implied in how much you still have to do.

I'm interested in how people confront this bundle of difficulty and I'm really attracted to people that have gained some mastery over it, people that are unperturbed by the daily storm.

1/27/2021

I was coiling wire with the drill today. Sometimes it rolls onto the dowel smoothly. More often it goes on stubbornly. The wire backs up onto itself in a jumble. I have to keep changing my hand position because no position seems comfortable or effective. The process moves along in fits and starts. When the process works smoothly I always feel I've learned something, like I've unlocked the difficulty of the process and have arrived at a plateau where, if the process again becomes unruly, that unruliness will be an aberration, a blip in an otherwise predictable unfolding of events.

I often think this is the Western relationship to death and sickness, the sense that it's an aberration. I remember reading somewhere that the Sanskrit word for pain (as in the Buddhist, 'life is pain') translates into 'bad axle'. Basically life is a wheel whose parts do not move smoothly against one another, a wheel that cannot provide a smooth ride. This is why etymology is cool. To say that life is pain *does* seem pessimistic. To say that a smooth ride will always be brief, will always become an unruly ride around the next bend, is something I can endorse.

When you are making work, materials will always bring this bad-axle reality home to you. You might think you have achieved mastery, and you probably have to some extent, but there's always impasse and stubbornness inherent in materials. Like pirouettes: sometimes they work and often they don't and that is never going to change.

1/29/2021

Today I was remembering when Shane's parents bought the property adjacent to their ranch and we went over there and explored the house which was still full of furniture, and all of the sheds and storage units that had decades of personal effects in them. The Beckerman house. It long held a kind of unsatiated allure for me. It was an appeal related to the intense love I had for historical museums as a kid. In those museums the rooms of long-dead historical figures were preserved as though they might return at any

moment and resume their routines, carry on their relationships with all the tools and objects on display.

There was a shed on the Beckerman place that was (probably still is) full of tools and old gas cans and ropes and wires. It was not just a little dump; many objects were still hanging on nails or arranged neatly on homemade, makeshift, wooden shelves. I still think about that shed even though they sold that chunk of land six years ago. I like to think about the potency all those objects had for the person who put them there, each one occupying space in that person's mind. I imagine that stranger carrying an inventory of the shed's objects in his imagination, each object vitally related to a task, to the work of surviving.

I guess this is a cousin to my interest in the space between a person and their work. I remember reading Hannah Arendt's declaration that 'the only thing that results from conveniences is the use of them', and that 'everything that enters a person's life immediately becomes a condition of their life'. There's a way that objects, especially tools and objects of daily use, hold us captive, and have a reality in our minds that is not less real than the reality of the natural landscape. They have that power because they're related to the body and its upkeep. That stranger needed that shed like he needed his hands. The shed and his hands were both part of an orchestra of necessary maintenance. He had to reach for those things, know where they were, put them away carefully. I wonder how he felt about them.

2/4/2021

A primary connection between my dance and sculpture practices is the invitation of space... the open road, the gallery, the studio, the stage. Big empty spaces illicit a kind of lust in me. I want to use them up, traverse them. This is one of the few things (along with the stations of the cross) that made church marginally bearable to me as a child. I'm glad we were Catholics because Catholic churches had more to offer my space lust than dowdy, beige, and contemporary Protestant churches. I remember looking at the vaulted ceilings at The Shrine of the Sacred Heart in Baltimore and imagining occupying all that unused space. Its emptiness seemed both absurd (what a waste!) and very alluring.

This lust for traversing space is also why I go for runs, even though I find their toil hard to bear. When I set off for my run today I thought of Seinfeld's brilliant explanation of his love of cars: when you're in a car you're both inside and outside, in motion and still.

2/7/2021

I finished a new looped wire sculpture today (one member of *Pair*) and I put it out to rust. It took me a while to realize that I didn't have to wait for the world to add the rust (via rain) and that I could make it happen on my own by spraying the thing down with the hose.

I like the rust because it makes the thing more vulnerable, it reveals that it is porous to the world, affected by it. I've known for a long time that the reason I prefer old things is because they communicate vulnerability. I find new things intimidating. They are certain of themselves in a way that I find discomfiting, like strangers that you have to brush your hair for.

There are so many new houses in our neighborhood. I stopped by an open house the other day and when Shane asked what it was like inside all I could say was that it was aggressively high end. I couldn't really give him a better description. It's that aggressiveness I perceive in sleek, new, culturally current things that I just don't like.

Here's the other thing about old things: you might be the only person who knows how to work them. We always had bad old cars when we were growing up, a '79 Pinto and then a '79 Ford Fairmont. We were never allowed to say unfriendly things about them because they often didn't start and Mommy was sure that talking shit about them would make it more likely that they wouldn't start. So their shittiness was also a way of getting to know them, or relating to them more intensely than to new things. I will say, I love having a car that I know will start every morning. In fact, that's all I need from a car in order to think it is a really great car.



Figure 5: *Pair*, 2021

2/9/2021

In one of my many imaginary ongoing arguments with my mother-in-law, I take issue with her dismissal of domestic maintenance as a waste of time. I understand why she has an agenda against domestic life. She's a woman and a medical doctor and was born in 1940. So much of her life was a rebellion against the social expectation that she would be defined by the roles of wife and mother.

But to me domestic rituals have always had an element of performance. When mommy washes her dishes she almost always dries them and puts them away. She doesn't like evidence of maintenance to linger. She just likes things to be in a perfect state all the time (no home in the world is cleaner and more orderly than hers and I say that with no irony and no exaggeration).

I like to leave my dishes in the drying rack because to me they are evidence of my labor, like the tools in the shed at the Beckerman house are the evidence of a bygone person's labor. They are a document of a performance. All the acts of maintenance that life requires are alive with some element of performance. Folding clothes, sweeping, and scrubbing floors are all acts. As such, they *are* me. Or I *am* them.

This kind of performance (any performance really) is never really done for another's gaze. There's just no way that the witness or appreciation of another person could recoup the investment you've made in producing the performance. It's the same in dance performance. My investment of time and attention can't possibly matter enough to someone else. Only a parent watching their child's performance could possibly care enough.

The effort of maintaining life and making art produces a kind of excess that opens comparisons with religious devotion. As a dancer, I often call non-dancers civilians or laypersons. The excess of my earnest striving over 34 years of practicing ballet has made ballet itself into a kind of deity that I am trying to do right by. Ballet itself is a kind of supernatural personhood for whom I am performing. Ballet itself is the ultimate judge of my efforts. This construction always brings to mind Kierkegaard's concept of 'always being wrong in relation to God'. It sounds harsh, but when I think of that idea in relation to ballet (and my love for it), it seems benevolent. I think domestic chores have their own deity of excess, their own witness.



Figure 6: drying ziploc bag

3/14/2021

On my bike ride to UT this morning I rode by a big brown early 80s looking building near the capitol (a building that I ride by often). It's a serious, dour looking building. Today, for the first time, a single door was open in the sea of French doors that make up its facade. The sight was so arresting and came at me with so much force that it changed my day entirely.

I was reminded of that time in San Francisco that I experienced an earthquake and my first thought was, 'someone pushed the house'. The open door in this serious looking

building circumvented my mind in a similar way. The sight affected me before my brain could really make any sense of what was going on.

What was this I was seeing? A kindred spirit, for starters. A person that wanted the world to get all over their stuff. But the open door also changed the entire building. It was suddenly friendly, vulnerable, communicating. A breach! The open door was a breach! It functioned like humor does within the routine of daily life. Our routines produce certainty and reality through the force of repetition and then a funny person lifts that veil of certainty for a second and reality is momentarily disrupted. It's a good breeze, motion. This open door was the same thing. I loved it. If my work could succeed at this I would be so pleased.



Figure 7: Westgate Tower with one open door, 1122 Colorado St., Austin, Texas, 78701

3/14/ 2021

I was cutting (a lot) of fabric today for *The Incident*, a geometric piece I'm making which is a quilt of sorts. It's all triangles and parallelograms. I never really work with straight, regular lines. I was startled by how little waste is produced when you cut regular shapes out of a regular shape. I realized that this was a crude metaphor for my sense that bodily experience is an excess. It exceeds what is culturally acceptable. When I cut bodily shapes out of fabric (like for my figurative sculpture), there is so much wasted fabric, scraps that are not useful for anything. When you cut roundness out of rectangular fabric that's just how it goes.



Figure 8: *The Incident*, 2021 (title courtesy of Jeannie McKetta)

3/18/2021

Commercials for new cleaning devices always include a white woman wearing khaki pants. In these advertisements she is always at ease. Her body is not bent to her task. Even though she is cleaning, she is able to *experience* herself and the world. She is upright, not sweaty, clean, calm. The Swiffer makes it possible for her to get the job done but still be a free woman, unencumbered.

When Maria and I lived together in San Francisco, our third roommate, Kori Jenkins, always referred to our cleaning style as “Polish cleaning”. I think she was a little alarmed by the vigor we employed. We did a lot of scrubbing, sweating, working on our knees. We were the opposite of the white lady in the bright house wearing khaki pants. We let the task bend us, dictate our form.

I think of this often. I don’t know if this is really a Polish thing or if it’s a function of growing up in the Cleanest House in America. But I do think that being bent to a task is treated as a problem in American culture. The solution to that problem is the white woman in khakis. She still has to clean her house, but her upright posture communicates none of the shame of being tied to one’s own maintenance. She is Sisyphus pushing the rock uphill but also enjoying the view. Personally I’m not buying it. I don’t think the problem of maintenance can be solved by replacing scrubbing with leisurely wiping.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XUPOqkcQSec>

3/30/2021

Tom Thompson, who once owned the Coffee Mill in Baltimore, could tell you how many ounces a bag of coffee weighed just by holding it. I love this kind of bodily knowledge!

I’m making a new, very tall sculpture (*Meat Tenderizer*) to eat up some of the (very enticing) vertical space at the Visual Arts Center, which will house our thesis exhibition. I don’t like to think about the engineering for my sculptures in a concrete way. So, I bought some metal that was really heavy, welded some other heavy metal to it (Shane actually did the welding), and started attaching one thing to another in a kind of clumsy upward striving.

Shane came in and started interviewing me about my plans and immediately told me that the thing wouldn’t stand up. He’s a civil engineer. I knew he was wrong! My body had held or maneuvered all the elements of the assemblage and had stored abstract impressions of those elements. I was carefully using those abstract impressions in my decisions about the thing’s ability to stand up. Shane started listing calculations and scoffing. It was distressing.

The next day he came in and gave the thing a good shove and had to concede that I was right. It wanted to stand up.



Figure 9: *Meat Tenderizer*, 2021

Thomas F. Thompson, 58, operated Coffee Mill in Hampden for decades

By Jacques Kelly
THE BALTIMORE SUN

DECEMBER 20, 2003

Thomas F. Thompson, who operated a Hampden coffee and tea store for more than a quarter-century, died Tuesday of **lung cancer** at his Homeland-area home. He was 58.

Mr. Thompson opened the Coffee Mill on Chestnut Avenue in 1974. Observers said it was one of the first such businesses to open in a working-class neighborhood that has since drawn restaurants, galleries and other shops.

"He had the first boutique store in Hampden, and it was really quite charming," said David Key, owner of Key Coffee and the Daily Grind. "My first good coffee experience in Baltimore was at that store. His customers were very loyal to him. They liked him. He had a calming, professorial air about him, with a salt-and-pepper beard, a tweed jacket and sweater."

Born in Baltimore and raised on Halwyn Avenue in Govans, Mr. Thompson was a 1963 graduate of Towson Catholic High School. He earned a degree in psychology from the University of Baltimore and master's degree in education from Morgan State University. From 1971 to 1978, he taught math in the Baltimore City public schools' Classrooms Without Walls program, a nontraditional learning experience for at-risk children.

While teaching in Southwest Baltimore, he visited the old J. Edward Custy Coffee Co., a South Carrollton Avenue wholesale business begun in the 19th century that he later bought.

"They [the Custys] taught me the delivery routes, the loose-tea business and how to blend coffees, mixing Colombian beans with Brazilian to get house blends. They showed me the path to good coffee," he said this year in a Sun interview.

Mr. Thompson ran the Coffee Mill until this year. His wholesale coffee business remains open.

"He was a real maverick in the caffeine wars," said his brother, Gerald C. Thompson, who lives in Ruxton. "Tom took the enjoyment of coffee and tea to a very personal level. He'd work with you until you were satisfied. When the Starbucks came in, it never changed his style. His customers knew exactly what they were going to get when they came through the door."

He had other locations, including Main Street in Ellicott City from 1974 to 1976, Brown's Arcade on Charles Street from 1981 to 1986 and Belvedere Square in Govans from 1986 to 2000.

"He educated his customers about different coffees, which reflected his roots as a teacher," said Patti Pfefferkorn Griffin, an owner of the Pfefferkorn Coffee Co. "He was very much an old-fashioned shopkeeper too, who never stopped trying to please his customers. He was also very much at the forefront when the coffee industry went into new facets. It was in his nature to be creative."

Friends recalled his shop was filled with old coffee and tea bins, and its air was redolent with his wares.

"When you entered his business, you entered his life," said a childhood friend, Mike Tewey, who lives in Westport, Conn. "When you walked in his store, it was like you entered his living room. He was an incredibly loyal friend."

"He cared about the people around him and the people he met every day," said Ed Bloom, who owns Ethel and Ramone's Restaurant in Mount Washington. "He could always find the good in somebody. He loved the Hampden people. He always wanted the hardware stores and the mom-and-pop grocery stores to remain and not be displaced by the craft shops."

Mr. Thompson was active in Democratic politics. He was a member of the Knights of Columbus and was a board member of Florence Crittenton Services of Baltimore.

A memorial Mass will be celebrated at 10 a.m. Monday at St. Mary's of the Assumption Roman Catholic Church, 5500 York Road, where he was a member.

In addition to his brother, survivors include his wife of 18 years, Rosemary Maguire; a daughter, Allisun Thompson of Baltimore; his mother, Mary Elizabeth Thompson of Timonium; and a sister, Mary Barbara Schmidt of New Freedom, Pa.

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Figure 10: Tom Thompson's obituary, RIP

4/10/2021

I was wearing my favorite amber earrings today. They make a gentle sound when the wind blows that only I can hear. I enjoy it intensely. It's like a tiny, private performance of a communal, earthly force: the wind. There's a privilege in this intimate translation of the wind. It's the poor-man's version of wealthy people buying homes in Marin where they can enjoy the stunning force of the outdoors from a private deck.

One thing that has been good about the pandemic for a mother who is working and pursuing a degree: the increased visibility and acceptance of encumbrance. I don't think it will last but I've appreciated it nonetheless. Generally professionalism is synonymous with being unencumbered. It's about being an island: a discrete being with no body, no personal problems, no children. The zoom workplace has made that kind of professionalism hard to maintain. Dogs, roommates, spouses, kids, they are all included. It's been good for me. I've felt quite unabashed about being visibly encumbered.

4/20/2021

When I was a kid and other kids would talk about visiting Disney World and 'meeting' Mickey Mouse I did not imagine that they were meeting a human in a Mickey Mouse costume. I imagined that they were meeting the *real* Mickey Mouse, that at Disney World the universe of animation somehow entered the real world and the two mingled in actual time and space. I was so disappointed to learn this wasn't the case. I lost all interest in Disney World from that point on.

I engage certain qualities of color in my work repeatedly because they suggest some of that mingling of cartoons and reality. The day we shot THIS HERE US NOW was a rainy one, and I wasn't sure that it would clear up soon enough for us to shoot. But I made the call for us all to drive out there because I knew I wanted to see all those saturated colors (golden yellow, that mysterious red/orange, Kelsey's blue leggings) under a cloudy sky. The quality of those colors in flat light is akin to meeting the real Mickey Mouse. I feel the same way about the juxtaposition of green fabric and metal in *Chris and Jane's Gate*.



Figure 11: THIS HERE US NOW, 2021. Pictured (from front to back), Kelsey Oliver, Alexa Capareda, Michael J. Love, Magdalena Jarkowiec

4/22/2021

I installed most of the show today and a great relief spread across my mind that allowed me to take in the world around me in a way that I have not been able to in these last two months of manic work. I passed a construction worker near campus who was directing a dump truck with hand gestures. His hand was so smart! He had two fingers up and was moving his hand forward at the wrist with short, emphatic, confident motions. It was clear that he was accustomed to communicating vital information in this way. His gesture looked as smart as words.

The confidence in his motion, the sight of a body asserting it's own personal logic, is what interests me about working with dancers. I have worked with Kelsey and Alexa so many times that I thoroughly understand their bodily logic, its genius and its limitations. When we make things together we occupy a communal abstract space. The same simple gestures thrill all of us. I know when things are good when we all love them, even if the gesture in question seems too plain to make an impact.

The gesturing construction worker was holding a pickle in the other hand and he was only eating the inside of it, avoiding the skin like you would avoid the rind of a melon. I almost stopped my car to ask him why. This is another kind of personal logic. I get excited when people have idiosyncratic ways of interacting with foods or objects. There is an intimacy between that person and the food or object in question that gives you a window into their private world. It's akin to my interest in the space between a skilled laborer and their materials. It's a space I often want to get into and know more about.... hence my inclination to pull over and talk to the man about his pickle eating.

4/24/2021

I was thinking today again about my love for and use of hyper saturated colors. In addition to the Mickey Mouse thing, there is the *excess* communicated by saturated colors. I don't just mean that they are loud; they actually defy boundaries. When I sewed green fabric over all the chain link in *Chris and Jane's Gate* the quality of the green and the fact that it's a soft material actually reduced the definition between the chain link and the air around it. Saturated colors bleed into the world. They resist containment.



Figure 12: *Chris and Jane's Gate*, 2021

4/27/2021

Today I decided that the big, fabric-covered plywood shape at the center of *Meat Tenderizer* wasn't working. I had it covered in a yellow velvet which was bunching in a way that I couldn't accept. It's always a relief to admit that something isn't working.

After the kids were asleep I re-covered it with a floral fabric that's akin to a hobby store acid trip. The plywood shape, "recalls moves that characterize strategies of mid-century modern sculpture" (the words of Jeannie McKetta whose excellent writing will accompany my work in the *small refusals* catalog). I think she's right. I realized that this floral plywood shape was me digesting my childhood relationship with the East wing of the National Gallery in DC.

Growing up in Baltimore we travelled to the National Gallery often. We went there so often that the space and certain permanent works from that time are mapped out in my mind with the same kind of force and intimacy as my hometown and childhood apartment. There was a giant woolly textile work hanging in a recessed area above the research library for most of my childhood. I've tried to learn whose work that was but have not succeeded and it's no longer there. I learned last year that the Henry Moore sculpture at the building's entrance is a Henry Moore sculpture. Until then it just lived in my mind as the shape it is and how warm it gets in the summer. I have photos against it with my grandmother that I remember but cannot find.

Because those works and that space became familiar to me when I was so young, I didn't consider them to be part of a world that might not really be mine (because of my class, gender, or ignorance of art history). Now I understand the many layers of gate keeping that are part and parcel of an institution like the National Gallery. I am intimidated by the middle aged white women in stylish white shirts and ugly/cool glasses who generally rein over this kind of institution. But I can still see it with the less mediated vision of childhood. I still feel welcome in it like I do in a forest.

When I was a kid I was also really into He-Man. I felt a kinship with He-Man. I imagined myself being He-Man. I didn't have any need for She-Ra. I think that because my understanding of American culture was so fuzzy, and Maria and I were always such social outcasts, I identified with cultural phenomena that were clearly not for me in my own private way. It didn't bother me that He-Man was not for little girls. My relationship with him had an immediacy that was abstract, apart from culture.

If there are references to Miro and Calder in my work, they are not art-historical references. They are private and immediate like that love for He-Man

The End (kind of)

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